THE TALK OF THE TOWN

HEADACHE

By Rex Lardner and Brendan Gill

August 7, 1948

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WHEN the big tobacco companies raised the wholesale price of cigarettes seven-tenths of a cent a pack a couple of weeks ago, blaming the high

cost of flue-cured tobacco and the increased costs of shipping, the local over-the-counter price of cigarettes went from twenty cents to twenty-one cents and the cigarette-vending-machine price from twenty cents to twenty-three cents. Despite this apparent handsome increase in profit, the raise wasn't altogether welcome to the vending-machine people. So, at any rate, we were informed in the course of a call on the Rowe Corporation, 31 East Seventeenth Street, which is confident that it manufactures, installs, and maintains more cigarette-vending machines than any other firm anywhere, with some thirty thousand of them throughout the country, dispensing a hundred million packs of cigarettes a year. The mechanical alterations that have had to be made in the machines in use locally, which number three thousand, so that they will accept a quarter or nickels and dimes total-ling a quarter, instead of twenty cents; the cost of getting two pennies in change under the cellophane wrapping of every pack; the recent rise in the cost of match-es, a folder of which goes with every pack; and the one-cent increase in the state stamp tax last January—these factors, we were given to understand, account for the three-cent jump. No charge for the headaches the change-over has caused the Rowe people here.

George Seedman, secretary of the Rowe Corporation, told us that the change-over caused no headaches what-ever in California, where the markup brought the price of cigarettes to an even twenty cents. "It was very neat in Birmingham, too," he said. "Down there, they not only have the seven-cent federal tax and a two-cent state tax but a three-cent city tax, and the markup brought the total to an even quarter." Here there is no city tax. The state-tax stamps are put on by the Rowe company before the cigarettes go out to the machines, of which there are two kinds, Mr. Seedman told us— manual and electric. "With the manual machine," he said, "you have to pull the plunger out to get your cigarettes; with die electric machine, you push the plunger in. Quite an improvement. The manual machine is a nuisance to alter, because it was set to take only two dimes, or a dime and two nickels, or four nickels. The electric machine is easier, because it was designed to take not only those various combinations of coins but also a quarter, for which it used to give a nickel change."

Mr. Seedman led us into a large room at the rear of his office, where a number of men and women were seated at long tables operating what he called penny-pushing machines. Their job consists of holding the side of a cigarette pack against the bottom of the machine, which, at the touch of a spring, shoots under the cellophane the two lowest of a tall stack of pennies. "We had to hire sixty extra employees for just this phase of the job," Mr. Seed-man told us. "Most of them are Puerto Ricans. They have an affinity for tobacco." Mr. Seedman took us back to his office and advised us that the first Rowe cigarette-vending machine, perhaps the first cigarette-vending machine anywhere, was invented in 1926 by William H. Rowe, a minor official of the Los Angeles police court. He exploited it himself and retired in 1940, at the age of fifty-six. His earliest machines could be deceived by streetcar tokens, lead slugs, and even bone buttons, but the present machines will reject anything that isn't exactly the right size, or has too much ferrous metal in it, or doesn't weigh exactly the right number of grams. It will reject even a real coin if it is bent or perforated. "Once," said Mr. Seedman, "we created a machine so choosy that it wouldn't accept legitimate United States coins, freshly minted; in the interests of accuracy, we'd made a machine that wouldn't accept anything. We'd gone too far. But you must remember that we work always in the realization that man is the natural enemy of the machine. Man *wants* to beat the machine. Too bad!" ♦

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By José Antonio Rodríguez

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TAKES

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The three-part series, about an elderly counterfeiter, established a template for narratives about small-time grifters.

By David Grann

POEMS

"I Consider Myself"

"When Soto went crosstown I couldn't / believe it, the traitor, the bat in front of / that sculpture Judge."

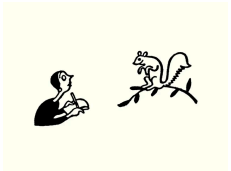
By Natan Last

POEMS

"Library of Congress"

"Here's a book / on neutrinos captured in Antarctica, / here's another on solar flares."

By Arthur Sze



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Laugh Lines No. 39: College

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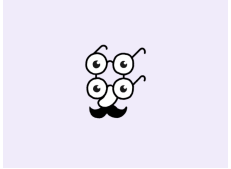
By The New Yorker



TAKES

Alexandra Schwartz on Joan Acocella's "The Frog and the Crocodile"

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By Alexandra Schwartz

BOOK CURRENTS

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BOOKS

Gertrude Stein's Love Language

How a self-appointed genius found her ideal helpmate.

By Judith Thurman

BOOKS

Briefly Noted

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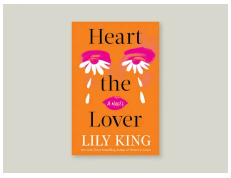

BOOKS

Briefly Noted

"Death in a Shallow Pond," "Dinner with King Tut," "The Ten Year Affair," and "What a Time to Be Alive."

PERSONAL HISTORY

Glowworms

In the punt on the river in the cave, beneath the dim light of glowing worms, it was thoughts of my own death that consumed me.

By Ann Patchett

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